

Better Late Than Never by lucdarling

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Jim "Chief" Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-03-19

Updated: 2021-03-19

Packaged: 2022-04-01 13:35:41

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 2,130

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

It's a good night, driving around the county with the music playing so they don't have to talk, until the red and blue lights pull them over.

Then it goes downhill, with Max late for curfew and the Chief of Police sticking his nose in where Billy has been managing just fine.

Better Late Than Never

Author's Note:

Happy Friday, have a one-shot of a scene that I wanted to happen in canon.

Let me know what you think in the comment box!

It's a good night, Michael Jackson playing and Billy drumming along on the steering wheel. The fields of Indiana are flat, small houses and barns in the distance dotting the moonlit landscape. It feels like they could drive forever.

Max catches a glance at Billy's watch and her stomach drops.

"Billy!" she reaches over, shuts the music off to get his attention more effectively than raising her voice would accomplish.

"Hey!"

"Look at the time." Max says urgently. She doesn't grab his wrist. They're careful, these nights, about touching one another. Billy leaves a lot hidden under his clothing so Max stays cautious.

She watches Billy's eyes flick down and his hand lifts to bite at a fingernail before he remembers he's trying to stop the nervous habit, bringing it down unscathed.

"We got fifteen minutes, Max. You'll be fine." He doesn't say anything about himself, nearly twenty one and still living at home. They both know why he hasn't moved out, gone back to California like he used to talk about.

His foot presses on the gas pedal a little more firmly despite his words.

Red and blue lights appear in the rearview and Max cranes her head to look.

"Face front," Billy snaps. "Let me do the talking."

Max grumbles but obeys.

"Hargrove," Chief Hopper calls out as he walks towards the Camaro. "You know I'm gonna have to bring you in, it's your third ticket this month."

Billy thunks his head against his seat as Max whispers, "Third?"

"Apparently the good ol' boys in blue don't like it when you sleep in your car," Billy shoots her a thin-lipped smile. Max frowns back.

Chief Hopper reaches the driver window and leans in. His eyes widen when he spots Max in the passenger seat.

"Ah, hello Max."

"Hey Chief," she replies, hands in her lap.

Hopper turns his attention to Billy and he blows out a breath. Billy looks straight ahead, not meeting his gaze. It doesn't matter, not when the darkening bruises are still visible from the driver's side window.

"C'mon, let's have a chat about all these fights you get into." Hopper reaches into the car and opens the driver's side door.

"I have a curfew," Max interrupts. "Can't Billy take me home first?"

Hopper's eyes narrow and he looks between the two of them. Max meets his gaze, the same curious and wide eyed look she turns on him when he tells her and El to turn their music down during weekend sleepovers.

"It'll just take a minute," Hopper says finally and he opens the door wider.

Billy follows him to the trunk of his own car, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What's up, Chief?"

"You're not getting in fights." Hopper says, cutting right to the point.

"Sure I am," Billy says with a slick grin. "Everybody in town knows I like fighting and fucking and drinking. Not much else to do after I clock out and night falls in this backwater town."

Hopper very obviously looks at Billy's knuckles. They're not wrapped, there's no fresh scabs on his skin.

"I did some digging, the second time I caught you up at the quarry."

"A bit of bedtime reading? You could have called, I would have told you a story over the phone if you were that interested." Billy shifts his weight from foot to foot despite his confident tone.

"Hargrove, you're an adult now." Hopper sighs and looks to the Camaro. "Max is still a child in the eyes of the law."

"What are you saying?" Billy stares at him, unamused. He's stonewalled this conversation plenty of times before, he can do it again.

"Not here, Bill. I think it's best if you follow my car. We can have a chat in my office, one we probably should have had long ago." Hopper waits until after Billy climbs into the driver's seat to settle his hat on his head and walk back to his Blazer.

Billy waits until the chief's door is shut to lean his head against folded hands on the steering wheel.

"Keep your mouth shut." He repeats tiredly as he turns the Camaro's engine back on.

Max doesn't turn the music back on as they follow the Blazer to the police station at the speed limit. She's quiet in the passenger seat, only making a curious questioning sound as she follows Billy through the deserted station to the back office.

"All right, c'mon in and take a seat." Hopper waves them into the chairs in front of his desk. The small station is silent, deserted but for them.

"I have eyes all over this town," Hopper begins before he stops, taking his hat off. He starts to run his finger around the brim, not

looking at either of them.

“I’m sorry that I failed you. That I continue to fail you.”

Billy’s hands clench into fists even as he leans back in the hard wooden chair, the picture of relaxation otherwise. Max’s leg gives away her anxiety, bouncing up and down on the ball of her foot, the other crossed over the knee.

“It’s just, your hands are tied.” Billy finishes, voice mocking.

“They are, unless you want to say something official. On the record.”

“Won’t do shit,” Billy snarls.

Max watches the two of them speak in half-finished sentences like a table tennis match, face thoughtful.

“What if I told you? It would have more weight, right? I’m not eighteen yet,” she adds quietly.

Hopper’s mouth twists down and Billy’s face pales.

“What exactly are you telling, Max?” Hopper is the one to ask as Billy’s eyes scan her for any sign of his own failure.

“Neil Hargrove is an abusive piece of shit.” Max says stoutly. Billy inhales through his nose deeply as she continues, “He’s been hitting Billy as long as he’s been married to my mom.”

Hopper sets his hat aside and reaches for a notebook. “It’s classified as assault now, since Billy is over eighteen. Past incidents won’t matter much to the judge, I’m afraid.”

“Okay then.” Max stores that knowledge away with a grim smile. “Do you need like, date and time? Or can Billy just roll up his shirt sleeves if the eye isn’t enough?”

“Max,” Billy warns. He stares at her, unamused.

She glares back. “I’m protecting myself here, jackass.” Billy bites his lip and doesn’t refute it.

“If you’re both serious about this, I need some documentation.” Hopper stands from the desk, walks across the room to a cabinet. “I haven’t done this in a while but it can’t be too hard to figure out.”

Max and Billy watch, silently, as the chief of police tries to figure out how to turn the camera on.

“Oh, give it here.” Max says impatiently. She takes it gently from his hands and in a few minutes, has it working.

“Right,” Hopper says. “If you could stand against the wall, shirt off?”

Billy strips, following the rest of Hopper’s instructions as the camera clicks away. He’s been through this before, when he was younger than Max and the school nurse pulled him aside. That time, he was nervous and ashamed as the light kept flashing with each photograph. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the camera.

Now, Billy blink back the spots out of his eyes as Hopper signals they’re done. He wonders what his face looks like through the lens but doesn’t ask. He reminds himself that he’s an adult, he’s not afraid of his old man. Sure it looks bad, getting knocked around when you’re almost legal drinking age but better him than Max. He can take it. Billy sighs as he settles back into the wooden chair, he knows how tonight is going to go and nothing is going to be able to surprise him when Hopper eventually confesses he can’t do a damn thing.

Then Max opens her mouth.

“What if Neil pushed me and it left a bruise? Does that count?”

“Yes,” Billy answers before Hopper can respond. “When the hell did this happen?”

Max huffs and shifts in her seat. “He wanted a beer as I was trying to make my lunch for school the next day. Guess I didn’t move fast enough out of his way.”

Hopper rubs a hand over his face. “Yeah Max, that will help. C’mere. You should just be able to lift your shirt, don’t even need to take it off. I’ll leave your face out of it.”

Billy watches, arms folded across his chest. The counter had caught Max's back right below her rib cage, leaving an ugly dark red line on sun-kissed skin.

"So he gets charged with assault, since I'm an adult," Billy rolls his eyes and speaks into the sudden silence as Max straightens her shirt. "Probably nothing for Max, knowing the system."

Hopper sets the camera down and heads back to his desk. "Only if you want to press charges, Billy. Otherwise we're just building a case. The more evidence, the better."

"Not if it means she gets hurt worse. What if he breaks a bone or something?" Billy isn't quite yelling but Hopper remains calm in the face of it. Max's eyes widen like she hasn't considered that possibility.

"He wouldn't—" Max stumbles. "I mean, I didn't move fast—"

"No." Both Billy and Hopper speak at the same time.

"It wasn't your fault, Max." Hopper says gently as she draws her knees up to her chest. "Neil Hargrove is an adult and should know better. He should behave better, to say the least."

Billy scowls at his feet but doesn't add anything.

"Uh-huh," Max says, lip service to Hopper's kind but stern tone. "So he's not gonna go off on Billy when we get home tonight since curfew was half an hour ago? Because he knows better?"

Hopper sighs again, weary this time.

"If I could, I would take you out of that house right now Max."

"But your hands are tied," she repeats Billy's words from earlier. "What if you took us home, said Billy was speeding again and then just like, hung out and overheard something?"

Billy looks thoughtful and shrugs when Max turns her attention on him.

"I'm not thrilled with that idea, Max." Hopper says authoritatively.

“Means I have to let one of you get hurt.”

Max and Billy both roll their eyes at the sentiment. She looks over at Billy’s watch.

“Well, I am definitely past my curfew and clearly not home so... Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll just yell?”

“Maybe,” Billy says doubtfully. They both know if that’s the case, the next day will be worse for it.

“Alright, enough jawing about it.” Hopper says, standing from his desk chair. “Both of you head home, I’ll follow and keep my lights off. Just call me a concerned citizen.”

Billy doesn’t wait for him to change his mind and tugs Max out the door to where hell awaits when the car stops.

Maybe this time will be different, maybe those imaginary scenes he imagined as a little kid - Neil’s hand raised, Billy in front of him and both of them pausing as the police kick the door in to come protect him - maybe that can happen.

More likely, Billy will lose consciousness and it will be Max his dad turns to. No matter what story Billy spins to explain the late hour, never mind the fact that she’s almost old enough to get her own license and then Neil really will be out of luck trying to tie her down, it’s going to end with Neil’s voice and fists and pain.

He’s resigned to it and swallows back the sounds he wants to make as he parks the Camaro in the driveway of the house on Cherry Lane.

Max looks over at him, slim fingers hovering over the seat belt. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Billy rolls his shoulders. “You though.” He turns a gimlet eye on her, taking in her pale features and tense posture as she presses the button to unlatch herself from the seat.

“Go to your room, Max. Don’t come out until morning.”

“Or for Hopper.” Max adds, cautious. The seat belt whips back to

starting position when she lets go and they both flinch at the sound.

“Yeah, if he makes an appearance.”

Billy leads her up the walkway, hands in his pockets. He fingers the warm metal of the keys in his left pocket and knows he won’t be allowed to keep them, tries to remember if Neil still has the spare or if he hid it somewhere in his room. He keeps his body relaxed, blank expression firmly on as Max steps through the door.

The light in the living room flicks on.